DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 374 448 CS 214 523

AUTHOR Ornatowski, Cezar M.
TITLE Reinventing a Nation: The Rhetoric of Political Transformation in Poland.
PUB DATE 28 Mar 94
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Objectives; Foreign Countries; *Freedom of Speech; Language Role; Political Issues; Political Power; *Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Criticism; *Rhetorical Invention
IDENTIFIERS *Poland

ABSTRACT

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of its satellite regimes, Poland, among other nations, has been engaged in a process of wholesale national reinvention. An analysis of this reinvention is instructive for scholars of language because it is largely a rhetorical process. It is aimed at supplying a new set of collectively validated symbols, at (re)defining the basic terms of national debate, and at inventing a new language for describing--and thus also conceiving and implementing--new political institutions and processes. One of the main challenges facing leaders of the Solidarity movement was what to teach people: Solidarity represented a spiritual as well as a linguistic revolution. Solidarity leaders considered the original political program, not one of institutional change, but rather an educational program. It represented a mixed bag of demands and articulations, or half-articulations: sovereignty, democracy (understood as personal relations in the work place and worker's self-management), independent trade unions, the Katyn massacre (a code word for admitting that Poland was under Soviet domination). According to Lech Walesa, the goal was to build a "Noah's Ark" of popularly accepted terms free from the straightjacket of official sloganeering. The desire for "truth" in the wake of intellectual oppression explains why much that is debated in Poland strikes Westerners as impractical or abstract. Some basic concepts that continue to be under contestation in Poland would include ownership, democracy, and sovereignty. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 374 448

92 CCCC presentation
Nashville, Tennessee, March 28, 1994

REINVENTING A NATION:
THE RHETORIC OF POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN POLAND

Cezar M. Ornatowski
Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies
San Diego State University
San Diego, California 92182
(619) 594-6515

In the last five years, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of its satellite regimes, the nations of Central and Eastern Europe have been engaged in the process of wholesale national reinvention. Such reinvention is to a large extent a rhetorical process, aimed at supplying a new set of collectively validated symbols, at (re)defining the basic terms of national debate, and at inventing a new language for describing--and thus also conceiving and implementing--new political institutions and processes. Jacek Kuron, one of the founders and leaders of the Worker's Defence Committee (KOR), the first organized opposition movement in former Eastern Europe, remembers:

> "we [KOR] did not even know really what to teach people, we did not have the necessary language. The language that was used for talking about politics for the last 30-40 years was the language of the institutional representation of reality. In rejecting that representation, we had to create a new conceptual network, common to us all, unofficial. I think that my own success in public in those days had to do with the

CS214523

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
C. Ornatowski
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

fact that I took the trouble to create a language. I didn't only describe reality, I taught people how to describe it."

"my [KOR--worker's Defence Committee] nie wiedzielismy za bardzo, czego ludzi uczyc, nie mielismy nawet potrzebnego do tego jezyka. Ten , co obowiazywal do rozmawiania o polityce przez ostatnie 30 czy 40 lat, byl jezykiem urzedowego obrazu rzeczywistosci. Odrzucajac ten obraz, musielismy tworzyc nowa siatke pojeciowa, wspolna nam wszystkim, pozaprofesjonalna. Mysle, ze moje sukcesy na publicznych wystapieniach tego czesu wynikaly z niczego innego, jak z tego, ze ja zadawalem sobie trub budowania jezyka. Nie tylko opisywalem rzeczywistosc, ale uczylem o tym, jak je opisywac" (Jacek Kuron, Gwiezdny Czas 156).

Timothy Garton Ash, one of the few Western intimate eyewitnesses of the early days of the "Solidarity" movement and author of the definitive study of this movement, The Polish Revolution: Solidarity 1980-1981, observed that "Solidarity" represented primarily a spiritual revolution, as well as a linguistic one:

"In the factories and in the newspapers," Ash writes, "people spoke and wrote openly about what they thought. The workers regained (in Alain Besancon's apt phrase) 'the private ownership of their own language.' The word 'truth' has begun to appear with the frequency of punctuation symbols in official declarations, in notices,

and in conversations. 'We need truth just as we need coal,' Lech Walesa said. In public opinion polls, the need for truth in mass media and the need to teach the 'true history of Poland' was mentioned right after the most pressing need--for freedom." (Ash Polska Rewolucja 182)

In his political momoir, Lech Walesa remembers that the major struggle faced by the budding Solidarity movement in the first days of the famous "Polish August" of 1980 was the "struggle for language." Gradually, Walesa observes, this struggle for language turned out to be at its essence the struggle for an entirely new "idea," an entirely new "social contract." With that realization, Walesa notes, the official, unsurmountable "wall" came up, a wall that had to be destroyed and that ended up burying the entire political system under it, even though Solidarity neither dreamt of, not intended, a change of such proportions.

It is only in retrospect, and from our Western eyes and our own ideological positions that we see the Central European revolutions in terms of some historically and ideologically consistent struggle for "democracy," or for capitalism, or against Communism, or in some such global terms. It is in retrospect that we impose a sense of teleological inevitability on the chain of events that occured in Poland since the fateful August of 1980. However, the original political program of Solidarity was emphatically, a fact stressed by Lech Walesa and all Solidarity leaders, not a program of institutional change, but rather an

"educational" one (Lech Walesa's term). The program was a mixed bag of demands and articulations, or half-articulations: sovereignty, democracy (understood in terms of personal relations in the work place and worker's self-management), independent trade unions, the Katyn massacre (a code word for admitting that Poland is under Soviet domination and that this domination was not bloodless), interpretation of national history, and distribution of goods and salaries (more equitable, independent, for example, of the profitability of the enterprise). Most of those demands would doubtlessly never be accepted by any U.S. government or employer, but their political acceptability, reasonableness, or even coherence was not the issue. The goal was to build, in Walesa's words, a "Noah's Ark" of popularly acceptable concepts, of universally understood terms, of half-articulated grievances into which "everybody could fit" (regardless of their specific convictions) to begin the task of rebuilding the foundations for national discussion free from the straightjacket of official sloganeering.

In fact, Article 31 of Solidarity's official platform proclaimed:

> "The chief instrument of deception is the language of propaganda, which damages our normal, everyday ability to express thoughts and feelings. The Union will struggle to return to the Polish people their own language, which can will enable real communication between people." (Tygodnik Solidarnosc 29, Oct. 16, 1981,

my translation)

This overwhelming national need for "truth," or at least for its assurance, was explained by Jacek Kuron at the hight of Solidarity's struggle on the Baltic Coast:

> "If we want the movement [Solidarity] to become a self-organizing revolution . . . we must remember, that truth constitutes [for people] an immensely important moral satisfaction. Only in the name of truth will they agree to self-sacrifice.
>
> How much people need spiritual satisfaction is apparent in the issue of monuments to those killed by the Communist regime. . . . One might think, that this [issue] is not so important, it is only one of symbolism; it is in the realm of symbols, however, that our people have been humiliated the most. A monument in Gdansk, at the very place where you have murdered us--the shipyard workers declared--gave the people of the Baltic coast and of the whole country generally the feeling of their own power and their solidarity, constituted at least a small payment for the humiliation we had to endure in helplessness, when news kept coming about corpses carted off to nowhere in plastic bags, for those rivers of blood so easily blabbed away on the radio and on television."
> ["Jezeli chcemy, zeby ruch byl samoorganizujaca sie rewolucja, jesli chcemy, zeby ludzie sami rezygnowali z roznych zadan, to musimy pamietac, ze <u>prawda jest dla</u>

nich nieslychanie doniosla satysfakcja moralna. Tylko za cene prawdy moga sie oni no roznego rodzaju ustepstwa zgodzic.

Jak bardzo potrzebna jest ludziom satysfakcja duchowa, widac bylo wyraznie w sprawie omnikow pamieci pomordowanych przez Komunistyczna wladze . . . . Wydawaloby sie nic takiego, symbol, ale wlasnie w sferze symboli nasz narod byl bardzo upokarzany. Pomnik w Gdansku, w tym miejscu gdziescie nas mordowali--mowiono w stoczni--dal ludziom Wybrzeza i w ogole calego kraju poczucie sily i wlasnie solidarnosci, byl skromna zaplata za upokorzenie, jakiego doswiadczylismy w bezsilnosci, gdy nadchodzily wiadomosci o trupach wywozonych donikad w plastikowych workach, za te rzeke krwi tak latwo zapyskowana w radiu i telewizji" (Jacek Kuron, Gwiezdny Czas 161-2). My translation]

This desire for "truth" in public discourse explains why much that is debated at length and so hotly in Poland, and, I am certain, in other Central European countries, often seems to Westerners to be both "impractical" and abstract, detached from the actual demands of current economic and political life. Watching endless arguments in the Polish parliament (transmitted live on Polish television), in the media, or among the people over the meaning of an abstract term such as "privatization" or over an event long past may give a foreign observer an impression that Poles have nothing else to do but waste their energies while the economy crumbles, the unions

are on strike, and the government is in disarray. However, it is important to remember that such debates are less a matter of instrumental policymaking and more a matter of providing "moral satisfaction." It is this satisfaction that in turn provides the foundation for rebuilding the trust in public debate, in government policy, in government itself, in public institutions, and in public media--in a word, the foundation for the very possiblity of what we call the "democratic process."

Similarly with the seemingly endless intense debates over interpretations of certain events in the nation's past, for example, over the Katyn massacre. Ever since a mass grave of Polish army officers was discovered on Soviet territory soon after the end of World War II, every Polish school child was told at home that the offiers were murdered by the Soviet security forces as part of the Stalinist policy of making Poland safe for Socialism. However, the official version was that the Nazis were responsible for Katyn. For forty years, Katyn was the codeword for the unspoken fact of Soviet domination of Poland and for general knowledge that the version of national history propagated by the offical educational machine was a lie. "Katyn" was the great unspoken of history textbooks, a gaping hole in the pretence called the Warsaw Pact, and the sham called the "Polish-Soviet friendship." Although Katyn was only one single event in a war that claimed millions in the greatest holocaust of modern times, in Polish national memory it was an event that gradually focussed together the building frustrations and humiliations of a life

without personal and national sovereignty, without control over one's life, and even without apparent control over one memory and one's language. For all these reasons, official acknowledgment of the Katyn massacre was one of the first of the famous "20 Postulates" presented by the striking shipyard workers in Gdansk in August 1980, the strike that led to the creation of Solidarity.

Today, Katyn is still on the lips of everyone, in turn (through one of these fine--and in this case hard won--"ironies" of "history") the most mentioned fact in new history textbooks and in all debates about Poland's international situation and political alliances. It was not until the Polish government formally recognized the historical facts and formally requested an apology from the new Russian government, that Poland could "get on" with the business of re-wrighting (misspelling and ambiguity are deliberate) and thus reestablishing the "ownership of its own language." This demand for "truth" and the frenzied joy of the Poles at the "ownership" of their own language, at the ability to say everything they could not say for more than forty years, accounts for the near-histerical level of public interest in a the minutest disclosures of improprieties, failures, lies, coverups, collaborations, and other problems in the recent "past." Such disclosures, which are aired daily and plentifully in all national media and in Parliament, and which have even tainted the reputation of President Lech Walesa with allegations of "collaboration" with the former security apparatus, may appear to be a form of political witch hunt, but they are, rather, a kind of

public "cleansing" of the collective conscience and a reaffirmation of the "referential" value of public language, a great national moral housecleaning in which language, the very act of enunciation, has redemptive value.

Debates over terms and symbols are therefore a critical stage in nation--building. Before any specific, "practical" economic and institutional reforms and changes can take hold or succeed, critical changes must be made in the all-important realm of collective signs and symbols. It is in this realm that critical reinscriptions must be made the terms in which "practical" political and economic action can subsequently be conducted or even thought of. (All this explains neatly why the first president of the "new" Czechoslovakia was a writer, or why writers and actors have been in the vanguard of change in Poland and still occupy prominent government positions.)

The "rhetorical" work of national and personal reinvention goes on daily, unceasingly, not only in the halls of the new Polish parliament, in innumerable media debates, in hundreds of call-in shows on the radio and in television, in the Polish counterparts of "Firing Line," "60 Minutes," "The Washington Report," "Larry King Live," "The MacNeil-Lehrer Report," and other similar formats borrowed directly from U.S. and Western European media, but in thousands of smaller and subtler ways. As one humorous, yet telling, example consider a regular column entitled "The Daily Capitalist" in one of Poland's major newspapers. This column, which to us may appear hilarious and absurd, offers "practical"

advice on becoming a successful "capitalist." The advice blends stock market explanations and investment tips, glossaries of (mostly English) terms pertaining to private business and ownership, and advice of the type "Start thinking like a capitalist: always lend money on interest, even to friends; stop giving things away; start thinking of time as having value." Reading this column provides a crooked mirror into our own Western social and private souls.

In such injunctions, "capitalism" is generally articulated in terms of individual attitudes, in terms of something one is, rather than in systemic or institutional terms, which is the weay we usually think of it in the U.S. We say, "we are a capitalist state," but we do not think, "I am John Smith, capitalist." On the other hand, I keep being struck to what extent the emerging discourse of capitalism and democracy in Poland operates within the language of identity, of the personal, the individual, and of personal relationships. This discourse is no doubt heavily indebted to Catholic Church and its rhetoric of individual will, individual responsibility, redemption, and salvation. In fact, words like "responsibility," "redemption," and "salvation" were the essential terms in Solidarity's political vocabulary and continue to play the role of "magic terms" in political debates.

Consider a humorous example of this kind of "personalized" understanding of concepts that to us are essentially systemic and institutional. During the days of martial law protests in Warsaw, one of the leaders of Solidarity got stuck on a major intersection,

arguing with his cohorts as to which way to turn. The debate turned into a heated debate on the meaning of "democracy." The others claimed that the leader was not acting in a "democratic" manner because he wanted to turn left, while the others wanted to turn right. The leader defended himself by saying that since he was "democratically" elected to lead, it is his responsibility to decide which way to turn; the others claimed he had no such privilege. The incident caused a delay and almost cost them their freedom.

Another example of unceasing, daily ideological work in individualistic/moral terms is provided by a daily show on the Warsaw radio (Warsaw second program on long waves) which explores, through discussion among "experts" assembled in the studio and listeners calling in, the general, implicit question "How to live" or "how to be." For example, one show I heard in January explored the question of limits to personal and economic freedom and what to "do" with this freedom--how to live a decent life now that one can make one's own moral choices. One of the guests in the studio, a historian of culture from a major Polish University, offered a quick summery of Western concepts of ethics and values, from Saint Augustine to the Marquis DeSade, focussing especially on the need for self-restraint, on the concept of transgression, and on the need to erect a private, personal edifice of moral boundaries and spiritual values that may guide one in the world of commercialized vacuity. Another speaker, a professor of moral philosophy, reflected on the problem of what one can live for beyond money and

puerile, physical satisfactions of immediate desires. Such discussions, although they may ring quaint in the United States, are in increasing demand as the growing market economy fans pent up demands for consumer goods and for rapid Westernization.

Less then a month ago, another show in that series explored the problem of "The Dignity of Compromise"--a weighty question of obvious relevance beyond Central Europe. Practically all of the participants began by agreeing that the art of compromise has not been a part of Polish political and social culture and needs to be developed, on both public and personal levels, if the fledgling democracy is to succeed. But especially telling in this context was the presence of the word "dignity." In post-Solidarity Poland, the concept of "dignity" is intimately connected to "truth" and to the overwhelming need for truth and disclosure in public life. Ending the life of "double speak" and "double thinking" and of the pervasive linguistic self-censorship that was characteristic of the Communist era is seen as a psychological and ethical liberation; to be able to speak the "truth" in public as well as in private, bringing together private and public discourse, is seen as a major gain in personal dignity, a commodity that was in short supply on empty store shelves and in long lines for meat, sugar, and bread. It was the prevailing sense of solemn, almost ceremonial dignity that is reported by all witnesses to such events as the Gdansk Shipyard strikes of 1980. It is in reference to this sense of dignity that one foreign observer has remarked about "a whole country liberated from alienation" (in Ash, 183).

Some basic notions and concepts that continue to be under contestation as Poland redefines itself include:

--Ownership, esp. ownership of land (since land constitutes still a socially key form of ownership), as well as the basic principles governing land transactions: the buying, selling, inheriting, ceding, and ownership of land (incl. who can own land, i.e. foreigners vs. Poles, etc.)

--Democracy. Jacek Kuron has described "democracy" as " the key word that was supposed to solve all our problems. ["Slowo klucz, ktore mialo nam wszystko zalatwic" (Kuron, Gwiezdny Czas 198).]

--Patriotism. This term has been gradually wrenched away from the internationalist rhetoric of Communist propaganda to a more local, national sense. This term is especially at stake in the army, which has been especialy the object of intense ideological work in recent years and whose relationshipo to the country and to society is being intensely debated and redefined.

--Sovereignty (Pol. "suwerennosc"). Big question, intensely debated in the media, in public polls, in parliament: Is Poland really a sovereign nation. This term, like the answers to the question, are given different senses depending on the attitude towards the old regime and towards some of the other questions under debate (i.e. the question of the relationship of the "new" Poland to the rest of Europe or to the "new" Russia, or the question regarding the relationship between Church and state or Church and society and the individual).

"privatization" (Pol. "Prywatyzacja"). The shades of attributed

meaning here range from "theft" to "the only sensible way to restore economic growth and social justice," depending on who is speaking and whose interests are at stake (i.e. workers vs. new of old owners).

In the heated rhetorical atmosphere of national and personal reinvention, these and other terms function in complex and often hidden ways, less as unitary concepts and more as word-keyes or as power charms beyond which stand complex clusters of national sentiment, faith, belief, desire, and entire histories of struggle, as ell as complex current political issues. An example is the recent abortion controversy that continues to mobilize very strong popular feelings and political forces. The controversy resulted in Poland's anti-abortion law which now is the toughest in Europe.

In a very insightful recent analysis of this controversy in The Nation, Anita Snitow has suggested that "the church brilliantly mobilized many Poles' complex feelings of loyalty and hopefulness, knitting together their social and religious yearnings" (557). Church activism against abortion has "fed the reductivist sentiment that life under Communism was, above all, immoral, requiring a great, national purgation" (557). The issues of morality-sexuality-women-abortion-family have displaced much more pressing political and economic agendas from the national and parliamentary debate. Snitow comments, again accurately, that "Poles are experiencing what has come to be called in the United States a sex panic, a time of confusion about values and direction, when uncertainty seeks a culprit and finds loose women, or evil day-

care centers, or decaying families, or pernicious secularism--often openly, modernity itself" (557). The abortion struggle, as many Poles Snitow interviewed told her, "is not really about abortion at all." Instead,

> "the abortion debate is a way of talking about who will decide things in this new Poland. Or it is a way to distract the public from the reeling economy, or from government incompetence. Or it is a way to fight out ambivalence about free markets and boundless (possibly immoral) choices. Or it is a way of thinking about the Polish citizen in a democracy: What social forces will set limits on this new person? Purging abortion, I was told, means purging Communism, or saving the family. Abortion used to mean--and still-symbolizes--the effort to get women into the work force, but now that old meaning is socially dangerous, since jobs for women are dwindling." (557).

This is the "symbolic complexity" (nice phrase) of the abortion debate. Such symbolic complexity underlies most of the key terms in current political debates in Poland, and, I am certain, in other Central European countries.

In view of all that has been discussed here, it should be apparent that while we tend to think of the present changes in Eastern Europe in terms of the "birth of democracy," such an outcome is neither necessarily "natural" nor guaranteed. The reorientation taking place in Poland and other former Communist

nations can proceed along any number of possible lines, as the very foundations of national life come under increasing contestation. According to a recent study of public opinion in the nations of Central and Eastern Europe conducted by the Gallup Organization under the auspices of the European Community, in all of these naitons the majority of citizens report dissapointment with "democracy" and no longer support it (reported in Wprost, Warsaw, March 6, 1994, pp. 23-24). The reasons for this may perhaps be sought in the complexity of aspirations, motivations, and interpretations of events that continue to shape national and personal identities in a large part of Europe. It is easy for us to forget that these aspirations, motivtions, and especially interpretations do not necessarily mirror our own. The historic importance of the outcome for us, however, is beyond doubt.

Poland provides perhaps the best focus for studying such phenomena. Milan Kundera articulated the reason for this most eloquently when in an interview he ascribed to Poland an avant-garde role in the antitotalitarian intellectual resistance (Elgrably, Jordan. "Conversations with Milan Kundera." Special issue of Salmagundi on "Milan Kundera: Fictive Lightness, Fictive Weight," 73 (Winter 1987):3-24). "[I]f anyone represented an example for me to follow, an intellectual stimulus, it must have been my Polish colleagues," Kundera said. "I owe them much. And if I may recommend something, it is this: Study Poland! After 1945, Poland became the real center of Europe. By this I mean that it became the crux of the European drama between East and West,

between democracy and totalitarianism, between tolerance and intolerance" (15, my emphasis). Elsewhere, Milan Kundera has presciently described Central Europe as a "premonitory mirror showing the possible fate of all of Europe. Central Europe: a laboratory of twilight" (Kundera, Milan. The Art of the Novel. Trans. Linda Asher. New York: Grove Press, 1988, 125).